

A READING OF ANTONIO TABUCCHI'S *IL FILO DELL'ORIZZONTE*

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Sommario

Questa lettura de Il filo dell'orizzonte (1986) di Antonio Tabucchi esamina il percorso del protagonista, Spino, attraverso gli spazi di una città. La sua è una ricerca ossessiva delle "segrete ragioni" che guidano una vita. Nel tentativo di restituire l'esistenza ad un morto, Spino percepisce che la reciprocità del legame fra vita e morte può rivelare un'identità. Ma come l'orizzonte, l'obiettivo della ricerca sembra spostarsi con chi lo insegue.

*Death is life already lived
Life is approaching death
J.L. Borges*

*The city is inside like a poem
which I have not succeeded in stopping with words
J.L. Borges¹*

For Antonio Tabucchi the most notable characteristic of twentieth-century literature has been the "fracture" between art and life within the modernist antihero². He consequently never expresses faith in any totalizing master narrative nor in the Reason that explains and justifies it ("Il mondo è mondo / per essere dubitato", 1988: 30).

¹ "La muerte es vida vivida, / la vida es muerte que viene" (*Obra poética*, 1964: 122). "La ciudad está en mí como un poema / que no he logrado detener en palabras" (*Obra poética*, 1964: 32).

² "Il fare poesia e il riflettere su fare poesia è l'unica 'azione' concessa all'uomo nullità, è una vita mentale che sostituisce la vita reale, è la letteratura che sostituisce la realtà fattuale" (Tabucchi, 1978: 159).

It is his questioning of individual and collective realities that distinguishes Tabucchi from the majority of contemporary Italian writers. In Tabucchi's work the means by which we interpret reality are interrogated: he explores the manner in which narrative "structures how we see ourselves and how we construct our notion of self in the present and in the past" (Hutcheon, 1989: 7).

The persona of the author who destroys the only manuscript of his novel, *Oltre la fine* in "Storia di una storia che non c'è" as "un tributo, un omaggio, un sacrificio o una penitenza" (1987: 61) embodies the "questioning Being". This fictional writer is left with his memory of that text and with the phantasmal voices of potential literary creations that inhabit his nights of insomnia. Tabucchi's "oltre" aims at intersubjective dialogue and his persona purposely acts as a "mirror of its own structuration" interacting "with its environment to change its own reflection" (Ragland-Sullivan, 1987: 7).

In the "Author's Note" to *Il filo dell'orizzonte*³, a text which is part detective story and part a speculation on the nature of existence, Tabucchi confesses his fondness for Spinoza, the seventeenth century philosopher who modelled his objective rational enquiry on the geometry of Euclid. Tabucchi's declaration that the horizon is a "geometric location", moving as we move and only reachable if it is carried with us in our eyes (as in the case of the protagonist whose name, Spino, conveys obvious intertextual echoes), reminds us of the first axiom in Spinoza's *Ethics*, "Everything which is, is either in itself or in another". In the reflection of himself on the horizon, man sees himself as an infinitesimal point, a "human nullity", spatially displaced.

At the vanishing point his size is diminished to nothing [...]
When there is no longer an object or thing in the distance,
the sensation of physical space vanishes and man is
confronted with the unknown. (Kestner, 1978: 63)

Tabucchi's texts may be read as dreams, as fantasies which partake simultaneously of the conscious and unconscious realm of thought, existing in limbo between the two and, in so doing, dislocating the

³ Milano: Feltrinelli, 1986. All page references are from this edition.

reader temporally and spatially. Thought, consciousness, relation to others, to society, cannot occur without the mediation and intrusion of language through which everything is acknowledged and identified.

Il filo dell'orizzonte is conceptually, linguistically and structurally labyrinthine in nature. The reader must puzzle out the connections between the fragments of extracted “meaning” and piece them together like a jigsaw “to write his own story”. Actions, thoughts and explanations of events proceed via a pattern of association, of analogy, of contiguity as each mutates into the other – all being interrelated and interdependent:

Ha pensato alla forza che hanno le cose di tornare e a quanto di noi stessi vediamo negli altri. [...] ha ricordato un letto di morte e una promessa fatta e mai mantenuta. E ora quella promessa reclamava una realizzazione [...] trovava in lui, in quella inchiesta, un suo modo di compiersi: un modo diverso e apparentemente incongruo che obbediva invece a una logica implacabile come una geometria ignota: qualcosa di intuibile ma impossibile da formulare in un ordine razionale o in un perché. (98)

The notion of an implicit, incongruous, rational order underlying all our apparently illogical, meaningless actions is vividly illustrated in the simultaneously convoluted and geometrical thoughts that become apparent once Spino grasps the true connections between things:

Allora le case e i campanili acquistano un nitore troppo reale, dai contorni troppo netti, come una fotografia contrastata, la luce e l'ombra si scontrano con prepotenza, senza coniugarsi, disegnando scacchiere nere e bianche di chiazze d'ombra e di barbagli, di vicoli e di piazzette.

Tabucchi undermines the traditional concepts of unity and continuity, of a fixed centre, of borders and margins, and provides a decentered perspective of the narrative. The hospital in which Spino works has been fragmented. Only the temporary reception ward and the mortuary remain (11). The historic centre is ironically populated by outcasts who

would traditionally inhabit the periphery. Likewise the seagulls which usually inhabit the coast are also dislocated:

In giornate come queste, quando il libeccio soffia con violenza, non è raro vedere i gabbiani anche nelle zone più interne della città. (93)

The decentred perspective is further apparent in the description of the disused shipyard, the hulk of the Swedish vessel, the battered phonebox. These discarded objects, like the corpses abandoned in the mortuary drawers, are all waste fragments in the architecture of things. Their run in the puppet-show of life has ended (9). The identities and lives of the corpses are reconstructed and recycled.

Clearly, the need to reconstruct the identity of the dead youth, with the symbolic name of Carlo Nobodi, is also a way for Spino to search for and come to terms with the notion of death:

non si può lasciar morire la gente nel niente [...] è come se uno morisse due volte. (51)

His is an almost banal quest: of life as death and death as life. Such a quest is conducted through the physical city, meticulously described as if this were the “honest travel book” mentioned in the Prologue of *Donna di Porto Pim* (1983), yet semiotically rendered by the epigraphic representation of the past:

Nel cantiere in disarmo, dove una volta riparavano i piroscafi, ha visto la carcassa di una nave svedese inclinata su un fianco: si chiama Ulla, e le lettere gialle, stranamente, sono scampate al fuoco che ha devastato lo scafo lasciando enormi chiazze brunastre sulla vernice. (74)

The name of the vessel stands as an empty symbol/sign, a nullity, waiting to be (re-)filled with meaning.

That the city should be inhabited by these discarded objects alludes to the fluidity of the social and cultural values instituted by humans and

subsequently thrown out. Our laws, our beliefs are “constructed” and are thus transient and flawed. The need to escape from this atmosphere of urban decay is personified by Sara, who dreams of cruising on an ocean liner, bound for some exotic, tropical land. The reality, as always, is considerably more mundane. When she does manage to take that longed for holiday it turns out to be on the beautiful but much colder shores of Lake Maggiore. In fact, she goes on a three-day “school” outing and leaves Spino feeling displaced.

Spino focuses on the signifier “three”, which coalesces into the incongruous, associated thought of “three little orphans” (53) of a childhood experience. It is significant that this time warp, this mythical moment, should occur at a railway station, a site which symbolically represents a place of transition (and fusion) between two domains of existence: past and present⁴. His sensual perception of the grim physical landscape prompts his infantile memories of “poor summers”, of possible unfulfilled desires. His meandering thoughts fuse with the deep unconscious wishes associated with childhood. Later Sara’s message of the three day extension of her holiday, in order to visit Switzerland (74), serves to further remove her, both spatially and temporally, from Spino’s plane of existence.

While Sara evades to an open, “neutral” space, anticipated by the ride in the elevator car which created the momentary illusion of being in Switzerland (24), Spino turns to the “dark” side of city life, by visiting a night-club, an old pie-house frequented by dubious characters, a basement shop, and finally, the cemetery. The cemetery, like a museum, may also be seen as “life’s storehouse”, preserving memories, enclosing space, arresting time. The “urns” of the neo-classical temple housing the great men of the Renaissance reflect and invert the tombs of the commoners which are burrowed into the ground in the central squares of the cemetery.

⁴ Trains and stations are powerful icons associated with the representation of the city. They focus the imagination on the dramas of arrival and departure. Stations operate as signs for the beginning and end of a quest, or beginnings or ends of relationships. Taking a train often has the significance of a *rite de passage*, from one state of life to another. Stations are places of initiation either into the new life of the city, or to the wider world outside it. Station platforms are stages in the theatrical sense too, providing the location for significant, if brief, encounters.

On entering the cemetery, we too experience a sense of awe at the sight of the temple, the palaces and the pronaos which are not commonly found in a cemetery. We inhabit an oneiric space that is and yet isn't simultaneously a cemetery, a "city of the dead", a museum. It is a famous site described in all the tourist guides (90); there is a "gallery" as well as "central squares", which recall the city of the "small squares and alley ways".

This oneiric, irreducible and infinitely changeable space is deepened by Spino's distracted reverie-like state as he yet again responds sensorially to the bizarre objects contained in this city-museum-cemetery⁵:

where anything may happen [...] where time and space do not exist: the imagination spins and weaves new patterns; a blend of memories, experiences, free ideas, absurdities, improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply; they evaporate, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds dominion over them all: that of the dreamer. (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1976: 85-86)

In the text, the old women in the middle of the squares "thin out", an immobile man deep in contemplation suddenly gets up and sets off towards a small square by the exit. These momentary and irrevocable surreal apparitions infinitely refashion the mental topography of the city. In this particular episode (71-76) we are shown how life inheres and is reflected in death which, in turn, reflects and transforms itself into life:

È curioso come l'Italia ottocentesca abbia fedelmente riprodotto per la coreografia della morte la separazione in classi attuata nella vita. (91)

⁵ Similar spaces are visited by the protagonist of *Requiem* (1992): the Cemetery, the Museum of Ancient Art in which hangs a painting which was once exhibited at the hospital run by the order of St Anthony in Lisbon because it was believed that it possessed miraculous powers and could heal those infected with herpes zoster. These are simultaneously spaces of inclusion and exclusion and may be seen as a kind of *axis mundi*, the meeting point between life and death, between art and reality, between fiction and truth.

The rigid spatial disposition of the inhabitants of nineteenth century Italy may be seen to convey a cultural message of the fixed, pre-determined roles that men had at that point in history. The space “man” now occupies in the cemetery defines and mirrors the fixed social role and social space he had occupied in society in a determined historical period. The liberal humanist concepts of hierarchy, authority, community life, transcendence, cultural homogeneity, fixed absolute values of God and Country are subverted by the reference to the spatially dislocated, “floating categories” of modern men like Spino who seem to live outside space and time, inhabiting unconfined spaces: disused shipyards, the quays, the grim landscapes of railway lines (73-74).

The contrasting perspectives from which the city/cemetery may be viewed underline the ambiguity inherent in form and representation. From a distance, from the pronaos of the temple, we command a structured geometrical view where the directions and dispositions of the cemetery are clearly definable:

A Sud e a Est i quartieri dell’aristocrazia; a Nord e a Ovest le tombe monumentali della borghesia commerciale; nei quadrati centrali, per terra, le abitazioni popolari. (91)

Such a view is coexistent with the “untidy geometry” (14) that Spino, the caretaker at the cemetery, and the reader have to contend with when immersed either in the thick of city life and/or in the textual maze. The forbidding experience of the city-labyrinth, of the text, is seen as a test that Spino and the reader must pass in order to extract some meaning from life, from the text.

When, in *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco reformulated the notion of “open” text in terms of a pragmatics, rather than an aesthetics, of reception, he stated: “an open text outlines a ‘closed’ project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy” (1979: 9). Both author and reader are “textual strategies”, pre(in)scribed or “foreseen” in the “maze-like structure of the text”. Eco postulates the situation of the reader-Theseus in the labyrinth of narrativity. Thus Spino must progress through the labyrinth of the city and the text takes

the reader through the maze of its “writing lesson”. The labyrinth, like the text, is an abstract model of inference or conjecture. The city/cemetery is thus both a symbol of the real/historical world and the fictional world of the novel. It is also a key to the ontological structure and thematics of the text. As Tabucchi tells us, each person must follow the geometry of his own trajectory (99). We must, in the midst of confusion, complexity, find the routes, the “incongruous logic” connecting the events and thoughts in our lives.

In this episode, as elsewhere in the text, Tabucchi explores the different dimensions of time: chronological time, psychological subjective time, the internal time of the narrative, historical time, time of memory and the infinite eternal time of the present. Ironic references made to the chronological time which traces Spino’s “real” one hour visit to the cemetery are punctuated by the spatialized, psychological time of memory. Time, in *Il filo dell’orizzonte*, leaves only dead vestiges, and it is to escape the solidifying effects of death that Spino, by taking on Carlo Nobodi’s death, assumes the knowledge of his own death. The first death, bound to time, is to be found anywhere in life. There is a language of time, related to wear and tear:

Sono quattro tavolini di marmo, con le gambe di ferro verde, dove i cerchi del vino e del caffè, che il marmo ha assorbito e fatto suoi, disegnano geroglifici, figurine da interpretare, l’archeologia di un passato prossimo. (14)

A language which is related to the semiotic “archeology” noted in the references to the various “archives”: the “piccolo archivio dei clienti di un tempo” of whom many must be dead (63); the case which is dropped by the coroner and will inevitably end up in a dusty archive (76). Such a language has its counterpart in the escapist language of the movies: the Saturday evenings at the Magic Lantern which stimulate Sara’s fantasies and enable the couple to avoid perilous topics such as marriage, which for Spino would not be a rational state as it would be “engendered merely by external form” (Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Appendix, XX).

Film imagery is also used to reveal the protagonist’s state of mind. In Spino’s daydream (91) concatenated references to the *Battleship*

Potemkin, kindled by his vision of the enormous flight of white steps, illustrate the movement of his unconscious thoughts which, to paraphrase Lacan, are analogous to the concatenated movement of the signifier in language. This unconscious, hidden desire, this unfulfilled need, seeks fulfillment, seeks union and can only do so by filling the empty spaces in language. In this instance Spino's desire is metonymical, it is projected onto the film which reflects his desire:

Per un attimo gli è parso che anche lui stesse vivendo la scena di un film e che un regista dal basso, dietro una macchina da presa invisibile, stesse filmando il suo stare seduto lí a pensare. (91)

Desire is merely an empty reflection of himself, a hollow projection of the desired object which is never what Spino thinks he desires. As Lacan explains, this desire expressed in words is always elsewhere, eternally straining after a more adequate substitute for the lost object. Desire is thus alienated in the signifier (Lemaire, 1977: 196).

One of the strategies employed by Tabucchi to explore the displacement of subject and object, as well as broader ontological issues, is that of the *mise-en-abyme*. *Mise-en-abyme* involves the paradoxical reproduction ("mirroring") within the fictional world of the fictional world itself⁶. *Il filo dell'orizzonte* is riddled with instances of "architectural" *mise-en-abyme*, and their cumulative effect is to infiltrate paradox, corroding the fictional world's solidity and stability. The most conspicuous instances are found in the descriptions of the funerary monuments.

Ha sostato a lungo davanti alla venditrice di nocciole, guardandola con attenzione. [...] È evidente che la vecchia posò per lo scultore col suo vestito della festa [...] Attorno alle braccia porta la corona di nocciole che vendette per tutta la vita, ferma a un angolo di strada, per

⁶ "The vertiginous *mise-en-abyme* of metafiction is sustained by its perpetual dialectic of interpretation and deconstruction. It creates a pattern that stretches, not toward revelation, but around it. [...] Metafiction [...] reveals as much about consciousness as it does about fiction and language" (Stoicheff in Hayles, 1991: 90, 97).

farsi scolpire quella statua che ora, ad altezza naturale,
guarda il visitatore con orgoglio. (92)

As the figure is being described/read/observed she is being layered, recreated by the inherently palimpsestic function of language, literature and representation. The *mise-en-abyme* is built into the narrative as Spino, and the reader, are literally re-producing the statue. In this reciprocal contemplation the dynamic nature of the statue, of the text, of language is enacted by the interpenetration of subject and object, of observer and observed, of interior and exterior space. The description is thus spatialized in that Spino and the statue, the language of the text and that of the reader, are mutually related in one moment of time (Kestner, 1978: 63). The notion of reciprocity and exchange is underlined by the image of the strings of hazelnuts, representing her entire life-time, looped over her arms. Thus the figure of the hazelnut seller is being continuously appropriated, absorbed and transformed in an atemporal dimension by the visitor to the cemetery as well as by the reader⁷.

In the depiction of the bas-relief on another tomb time becomes cyclical and tenseless, undermining and parodying the precise, fixed, historical time of past events which are mythically and infinitely re-experienced in the present:

Poco più in là un'epigrafe su un bassorilievo che ricorda malamente il trono Ludovisi informa che Matilde Giappichelli Romanengo, donna virtuosa e gentile, varcato appena il sesto lustro, lasciava nel pianto lo sposo e le bambine Lucrezia e Federiga. Ciò avveniva nell'addì 2 settembre 1886, e le due bambine, che reggono con pietà il lenzuolo dal quale la signora Matilde sta volando al cielo,

⁷ Walter Geerts sees this meta-fictional *mise-en-abyme* as an opportunity to revisit the myth of Pygmalion “alla maniera di un *gioco del rovescio*: se è vero che la statua di Pigmaliione è l'unica che abbia mai camminato, la venditrice rappresentata qui [...] raffigura il processo opposto di chi, dopo essere vissuto, si solidifica nella statua, mantenendo più che intatta la crosta. È suggestivamente presente anche, nella *corona di nocciole*, la meccanica economica, per cui la capitalizzazione della vita s'esaurisce in una statua: cerchio inesorabile” (in Roelens & Lanslots, 1993: 117).

recano scritto accanto: Oh cara mamma, che ti offriremo
se non preci e fiori? (92)

The checkerboard of historical and natural references which establish the authenticity of Spino's story serves to remind the reader of the multiplicity and frequent unreliability of "signs" by which one "reads" experience.

[A]rt estranges and undermines conventional sign-systems, compels our attention to the material process of language itself, and so reverses our perceptions. (Eagleton, 1983: 99-100)

The frequent messages that Spino receives in the course of the text are inconclusive and elusive, forming the intricate conjectural space of the rhizome (Eco, 1994: 57). Like a dream this text stands incomplete, indeterminate, revealing an infinite potential for being reshaped, recounted by many voices.

Tabucchi uses the device of embedded narrative structures to mimic formally the function of language, the production of meaning and the infinite re-creation of the text by the reader(s)⁸.

Tabucchi deconstructs the myth of the extra-historical self (i.e., the concept of individual identity prior to and independent of social hominization [...]) to demonstrate that the subject is truly the synthesis not only of existing relations but the history of those relations. (Francese, 1991: 195)

For Tabucchi, the subject is a self-displacing identity within a field of ideological contestation involving Self and Other and all temporal dimensions. Thus the literary text is seen as an active part of a negative

⁸ See, for example, the piece entitled "Esperidi. Sogno in forma di lettera" (1983: 13-18) which is the result of "una lettura di Platone e [...] [i]l rollio di una lenta corriera". It is narrated by an "I" persona who is also dreaming about writing this letter about his dream about a day-dreaming Greek who goes to find the West and never returns.

dialectic that re-interprets the past and its relationship to the present as they become the future.

In this context it is tempting to trace the genealogy of the various spatial *topoi* in *Il filo dell'orizzonte* to other, earlier, Tabucchi texts as a means of understanding this re-interpretation of the past. The short fiction entitled “Esperidi. Sogno in forma di lettera” (1983) provides an intriguing example of the *topos* defined as “architectural” *mise-en-abyme*. The title alludes to the central dissonance between the lived experience and that of the recorded, transcribed experience which inevitably suffers some distortions in the transition from dream to text. The spatial symbolism is provided by the temple, representing the locus which bridges the physical and the spiritual world. While the physical city is a black-and-white chessboard of alleyways and small squares (1986: 73), the spiritual city is entirely suppositional

nel senso che non esistono gli edifici ma solo la loro pianta tracciata sul terreno. Tale città ha la forma di una scacchiera circolare e si estende per miglia e miglia: e ogni giorno i pellegrini con un semplice gesso muovono gli edifici a loro piacimento come se fossero scacchi, così che la città è mobile e variabile, e la sua fisionomia muta continuamente. (1983: 16)

The suppositional city could be seen as a projection of desire which, refashionable like desire, is manifest only in the present. It remains pure because the citizens “possono accedervi solo dopo aver raggiunto una disposizione dell'animo che si consegue raramente — e poi non fanno più ritorno” (16). Once again there is an implicit reference to death as the ultimate, unending continuum, transcending both physical space and chronological time.

In transcribing the dream of an irretrievable sublime experience, the subject must assert itself as “I”, as a separate autonomous individual as opposed to the “you” (the non-self/the other) to whom he is writing. This progressive and inevitable alienation of the subject from the essence of his being is reflected by his movement out of the “city” and his arrival at the top of the promontory. By projecting his vision/desire

to the horizon he displaces conventional map-space with relativistic space-time and thus reaches the vanishing point.

Tabucchi attempts “to denaturalise objectified codes of signification through diverse forms of multiple perspectivism that share a renewed dialectical relationship with history” (Francese, 1991: 183). For Tabucchi an understanding of the manner in which the past determines the present is fundamental for the contextualisation of the individual within society. Time and space are not construed as autonomous, objective data, but are represented as part of a social process by which all human knowledge is objectified.

In his recent literary production Tabucchi seems to have arrived at the conclusion that the active participation of the individual in the present not only determines the future, but rewrites the past. The writing of the present (and its preservation in texts) necessitates a re-interpretation of the past that identifies the determining factors operating in history. Of extreme importance, then, is the manner in which we live our “frattempo”, as he calls the human lifespan. We must search for our own “poetry”, a simple but practicable *modus vivendi*.

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